

Transylvania County Natural Area Inventory

WHITEWATER RIVER FALLS AND GORGE Significant Natural Heritage Area

Site Significance: National

Quadrangle: Cashiers

Size: 1,602 acres

Ownership: U.S. Forest Service (Nantahala National Forest)

SIGNIFICANT FEATURES: The Whitewater River is known for its astounding waterfalls, considered by some to be the most impressive in the state if not the whole East Coast. At the Upper Falls, the river descends over 400 feet in a series of plunges over steep cliffs. Spray Cliff and grottoes are scattered alongside and behind the falls. Over 25 species of rare mosses, liverworts, and lichens have at one time or another been recorded from the upper falls alone. Of these, four species are known from the Whitewater River Gorge and very few or no other locations in the state. These include three liverworts (*Cheilolejeunea evansii*, *Chiloscyphus muricatus*, and *Lejeunea blomquistii*) and the moss, *Pilosium chlorophyllum*. Eleven rare vascular plant species have also been observed in the river gorge and falls. These include single-sorus spleenwort (*Asplenium monanthes*), which is only presently known from the Whitewater and Toxaway River Gorges in North Carolina. Cliffs and dry rocky outcrops occur on the slopes above the river and are known to harbor populations of green salamanders (*Aneides aeneus*). In addition to the rocky habitats, the banks and slopes above the Whitewater River Gorge have a diversity of intact, forested natural communities, including Montane Oak-Hickory Forest, Chestnut Oak Forest, Acidic Cove Forest, Rich Cove Forest, and Canada Hemlock Forest. These forests also support a number of rare plant species, including North Carolina's only population of Radford's sedge (*Carex radfordii*) and one of three known populations of the mottled trillium (*Trillium discolor*) in the state.

LANDSCAPE RELATIONSHIPS: The Whitewater River Falls and Gorge forms part of the Escarpment Gorges Macrosite. The site is divided between Transylvania and Jackson County by the mainstem of the river, which forms the county boundary. It is entirely contained within the Nantahala National Forest and buffers the Savannah River Headwaters Aquatic Habitat, which encompasses all of the Escarpment Gorges river valleys. Unfragmented forested lands of variable condition border the river gorge to the west in Jackson County. A mix of private land and National Forest border the eastern edge of the site in Transylvania County. Unlike its neighboring Escarpment Gorges sites to the east, the Whitewater River is not contiguous with other gorge sites but is separated by a large block of private lands. To the north, the site borders Silver Run Preserve/Sassafras Mountain, a mix of National Forest, private property, and lands protected under conservation easement with The Nature Conservancy and Carolina Mountain Land Conservancy. This neighboring site buffers two of the river's major tributaries, Silver Run and Democrat Creek. To the south, across the state line, lie lands managed by Duke Energy, which are primarily in intact forested condition though without any formal protection. Lower Whitewater Falls, considered to be equally impressive as the upper falls, is located approximately one mile to the south in South Carolina.